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DOI
10.4324/9781003669791-7

Publication date
2026

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Agency Beyond Confinement

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Stuit, H. (2026). Prison, Home, Garden: Carceral Idylls and (Re)Thinking Detention in Robert Glas' *Justice Beyond Revenge. Recalling Louk Hulsman* (2024). In L. T. Schneider, R. Dillema, & P. Rebughini (Eds.), *Agency Beyond Confinement: Rethinking the Relationship Between Agency and Structure in the Contemporary World* (pp. 94-112). (Routledge Advances in Sociology; Vol. 421). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003669791-7

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5 Prison, home, garden

Carceral idylls and (re)thinking detention in Robert Glas' *Justice Beyond Revenge. Recalling Louk Hulsman* (2024)

Hanneke Stuit

Introduction

In the exhibition *Justice Beyond Revenge. Recalling Louk Hulsman* (2024), Dutch artist Robert Glas offers a diptych of cinematic art installations centred on 1986 – the year in which Louk Hulsman, professor of Criminology, gave his valedictory lecture on the abolition of criminal law. It was also the year in which architect Carel Weeber had his students build a life-size testing model of the prison cell he was designing for De Schie – a penitentiary realised in Rotterdam in 1989 which is still in use today (TENT 2024). Together, Glas's installations thus offer 1986 as a critical turning point in the trend towards intensified criminalisation and stricter punishment in the Netherlands after the 1980s (Van Agt 2023).

Through an analysis of these artworks, this chapter homes in on the metaphoric constructions that keep prison spaces "soft" and palatable in the face of punitive desire and thereby keep incarceration available for social acceptance over time. To do so, I offer the concept of the carceral idyll, which refers to the belief that confining people in the right way, in the right place and for the right amount of time benefits those incarcerated and keeps society safe. Although it may seem counterintuitive to romanticise the prison, carceral idylls are part of longstanding traditions of representation and are more ubiquitous than commonly assumed. Focusing on home and garden metaphors in Glas's exhibition, I will argue that carceral idyllic sentiments play an unacknowledged role in the architectural designs that prop the prison up, but can also inadvertently risk a replication of the logics of enclosure and exclusion in abolitionist discourses that seek to tear the prison down.

The carceral idyll is an aesthetic register – an emotional and sensory conviction that circulates socially and is naturalised in shared assumptions about what is deemed beautiful and right. On first sight, a given culture's shared aesthetic registers around the prison may seem to have "no purchase with the real" (Fludernik 2005, 21). However, through repetition and circulation such registers "nevertheless determine our political, moral and social actions because they become reified in our thinking" (Fludernik 2005, 21). The analysis of the carceral idyll can thus be used to deconstruct undetected

DOI: 10.4324/9781003669791-7

feedback loops between cultural expressions in arts and popular culture, carceral architecture, policies around detention and even abolitionist discourses.

As Monika Fludernik has demonstrated in her seminal work on metaphors of confinement – a hefty analysis covering 12th to 20th century Anglophone writing – the prison is historically associated with punishment *and* refuge. In its interpretation as refuge, the prison makes familiar metaphorical connections to the monastery and the school (see also Foucault 1977) and more unexpected ones to the home and the garden (2019, 610). In what follows, I will first discuss how the aesthetic – that which is deemed beautiful – structures Weeber's rather idyllic perspective on the prison cell in Glas's film *1986, or a Sphinx's Interior*. Then, I will detail how the method of close reading – a time-tested technique for approaching the aesthetic as a form of knowledge production – helps to trace how such carceral idylls are produced and how the formal decisions made in Glas's artworks amount to aesthetic acts that rework overly positive affective architectures of the prison. In the third section, I will discuss the counterintuitive structure of carceral idylls in more detail, explaining how they romanticise space as well as time in order to maintain the status quo and sometimes to create utopic horizons.

Continuing my analysis of the film *1986, or a Sphinx's Interior*, I suggest that the carceral idyll, as a metaphoric blending of the prison as a place of beauty and homeliness, is baked into Carel Weeber's prison design. The film then sets out to complicate this connection between the prison and the home through two aesthetic acts. Firstly, the film stages a form of domestic tedium in the prison cell that punctures a sense of homeliness and suggests domestic routine itself as prison-like. Secondly, the sequences that render the perspective of Jonathan Geerman, who used to be incarcerated in the cell that Weeber designed, emphasise the harshness of the prison itself and furthermore show how Geerman keeps the idyllic charge of the home alive by separating it mentally from the prison space. These different approaches to the prison as home trope unexpectedly show that idylls can be both strategies of control as well as survival tactics for making such control inhabitable (De Certeau 1988). This raises an important question: if idylls provide avenues for the fugitive expression of agency in the face of rigid structures like the prison, how can the task of undoing their repressive scripting power be achieved?

Moving on to Glas's engagement with the metaphor of the garden in the work of abolitionist Louk Hulsman in the second part of the exhibition, the analysis will make clear that even though the garden is intuitively thought as an alleviation of or even an alternative to prison, the connection between the two can be just as problematic as the one between the prison and the home. On the one hand, Glas's exhibition shows up the garden as inevitably ensconced in structures of enclosure, even if gardens are easily seen as even more idyllic than the home because of their connection to nature. On the other hand, I argue that because of this connection, garden metaphors can also go beyond the survival tactics of the home discussed in the first section; where the oscillation between the home and the prison remains a movement

between two (en)closed spaces that traditionally focus on seclusion, refuge and retreat, the garden's common place associations with reflection and growth offer a mindset that potentially radiates outwards.

It is such a beautiful room

1986 or a Sphinx's Interior, the film by Robert Glas from 2023 around which the first half of the exhibition is structured, takes place in a life-size replica of a cell from prison De Schie, also known as the Sphinx. Because one of the sidewalls of the replica can be removed, the film offers a view of the cell that cannot be obtained otherwise; the space is simply too small to afford a perspective of this width (Figure 5.1). This unusual angle also structures the film thematically, which stages three different perspectives on the cell in the replica: that of Carel Weeber, that of Jonathan Geerman, and a fictional one of a young Carel Weeber testing the cell for the first time, rendered by actor Ali-Ben Horsting.

The film opens with architect Carel Weeber visiting the replica, while Glas, invisible behind the camera, asks him questions about the design. At first, Weeber hardly recognises his own work, but once he looks around properly, he remarks: "It is such a beautiful room. I never realised it was this beautiful" (Figure 5.2; Glas 2023, 2.50).[1] Besides Weeber, no one in the film refers to the cell with the domestic term "room." Taken by his own line of thought, Weeber also remarks that the cell is actually so nice that it might not even feel like punishment if one were to stay in it for a few days (Glas 2023, 8.22). When Glas probes Weeber to consider the cell's true function

Figure 5.1 The cell without the fourth wall in *1986, or a Sphinx's Interior*. Video still.

Figure 5.2 Carel Weeber reacquainted with the replica of the cell he designed. *1986, or a Sphinx's Interior*. Video still.

by asking whether he also would not mind staying in it for a year, Weeber retorts: "I think you get used to it quickly."[2] The film then moves on to the perspective of Jonathan Geerman.

When Geerman is first introduced to the replica, he goes straight to its only chair, touches it lightly, almost with melancholy, before going to the window to see if it opens (it does not).[3] He then stands over the toilet bowl before settling into the chair. In another scene, he is smoking, frowning, and pacing. He leans in the doorway and says: "Often when it was open, I smoked like this." "Really?" Glas asks. And Geerman replies, smiling: "Yes, just like this." After a slight pause, Geerman is no longer smiling and tellingly switches to an intensified present tense: "I stand here looking out like this."[4] Another slight pause and Geerman turns around, mumbling "And then I go back" (9.12). Back to the window, the chair, back to pacing. Back to his memory of the cell. Geerman looks pensive, he licks his lips, he looks to the floor, he seems tense.

Prior to this moment, Weeber has already mentioned to Glas that he found it easy to design the prison cell, that he did not have any trouble with it – presumably in ethical terms – and that it took him less than a day to do so. To Geerman, who expresses his appreciation for how many functions he managed to squeeze into such a small space, Weeber further admits that the architect rather enjoyed working on it (Glas 2023, 20.48). However, despite the fact that all parties agree that the cell has been designed well in less than a day, Geerman's habituated response and involuntary use of the present tense suggest that it takes a lifetime to deal with the consequences of that design.

The aesthetic as method // disrupting carceral imaginaries

Weeber's comment on the prison cell as a beautiful room strikes an aesthetic cord, the relevance of which lies not in a value judgement of Weeber's design itself – pertinent as that may be – but rather in Glas's rendition of it in the film as an "aesthetic act." The aesthetic here refers not just to what is deemed beautiful in terms of form, but more generally to how representations organise "social perceptions of what counts and what matters" (Clarkson 2014, 3). Any expression has both a mimetic and performative relation to reality and thereby always both reflects and actively shapes our perceptions. The aesthetic acts in Glas's exhibition are even more deliberate in that they actively seek to "bring about shifts in the way a community delineates itself in terms of what it *perceives* to be significant, or even noticeable at all […] thereby recalibrating the terms of cultural, political, and legal interactions" (Clarkson 2014, 3, emphasis in original).

In this paper, I will attend to these aesthetic acts through close reading, a method that originated in the study of literature but which is broadly understood as equally applicable to all sorts of cultural "texts" (since Barthes 1957; Hayles 2012). Jonathan Culler defines close reading as "attention to how meaning is produced or conveyed, to what sorts of literary and rhetorical strategies and techniques are deployed to achieve what the reader takes to be the effect of the work or passage" (2010, 22). This attention to form is foundational for art-based disciplines and uniquely positions them to fathom how meaning is always produced through mediation rather than to be taken as given. That is to say, statements about content cannot be understood without an analysis of their form.

The goal of this approach is to produce knowledge about (aspects of) discrete cultural objects that can be corroborated by peers because the text itself is treated as a reliable source of data. From this perspective, a single work like Robert Glas's exhibition contains hundreds to thousands of data points.[5] Cultural texts never exist in isolation, however, which makes it necessary to connect the observations made in the context of a close reading to broader cultural trends. Because the rhetorical effects of formal strategies have been extensively studied – sometimes, like metaphor, over several thousand years – these rhetorics offer predictive value in how audiences will respond to artworks, even if the why of these responses is lodged deeply in the psychology of individual readers. As Lauren Berlant has put it: "each case makes its own singular claim for staging the general forces that dominate the production of the historical sensorium" (2011, 9). Through the study of "the affective *scenarios* of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life" (Berlant 2011, 9, emphasis in original).

Aesthetic acts pertaining to confinement are lodged, then, not just in individual works but exist in relation to a more widely circulated carceral imaginary – "a collection of culturally relevant images and associations that define our society's *ideés recues* about imprisonment" (Fludernik 2005, 16).

A number of prevalent scenarios structure such carceral imaginaries, like the exoticisation of the prisoner as an innocent hero focused on escape, inducing catharsis about audiences' own lives (Duncan 1996). Other imaginaries cluster around punitive desires that see criminals as deserving of strict punishment and are preoccupied with how this is best achieved (Fludernik 2019, Chapter 6). Carceral imaginaries also engage in cultural or political critique, for instance in the memoirs of people imprisoned for their beliefs (cf. Mandela 1994). Finally, the carceral imaginary has considerable critical purchase through emphasising metaphoric connections between the prison and confining social structures in the world at large, like colonialism and slavery, or by positing marriage and domesticity as prisons for true love (Fludernik 2019, Chapters 6 and 4).

In what follows, I will consider how Robert Glas's exhibition *Justice Beyond Revenge. Recalling Louk Hulsman* – as an aesthetic act – disrupts reified idealisations of the prison space. These acts are directed at the muffling effect of the prison as home trope emerging from Weeber's designation of the cell as beautiful, but an analysis of the exhibition also reveals a potentially overly utopic reliance on the garden as an antidote to the violence of criminal law in Louk Hulsman's abolitionist discourse. Before launching into these analyses of how home and garden metaphors keep the prison available as a positive space, however, I first offer the concept of the carceral idyll to describe society's fundamental romanticisation of the prison as a suitable space for correction and transformation.

Carceral idylls

The word idyll is often used synonymously with the pastoral, implying that both forms of romanticisation are about rural spaces and making it counterintuitive to think of idylls in relation to the carceral. Idylls are not necessarily about the countryside, however, but refer more abstractly to "an extremely happy, peaceful, or picturesque period or situation, typically an idealized or unsustainable one" (OED). It is perfectly possible, therefore, to entertain idylls in the context of the prison, all the more so due to the

> constitutive similarity between the monastery and the prison envisaged in the early penitentiary models […], which allows a much more idyllic reading of the prison as a place of peace and quiet, meditation, literary activity, and a life of the imagination far removed from the exigencies and hardships of ordinary existence.
>
> (Fludernik 2019, 110)[6]

The crucial difference between pastorals and idylls is that pastorals pertain mostly to the rural as place, while idylls are first and foremost temporal strategies. The place in which an idyll is set is relatively flexible, as long as that place can be bracketed from the usual flow of time.

Idylls share with the pastoral a deep sense of ambiguity which takes on different iterations in different contexts, but which tends to compromise materialities of extraction and dispossession (Peeren 2018, 64) or, in the case of the carceral idyll, confinement. If represented at all, these realities are never offered in their naked, realistic aspects, but rather in a softened and sublimated form. This sublimation is achieved, Mikhail Bakhtin argues about the agricultural idyll, through the production of folkloric time: "an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home" (1982, 225). This familiar spatial world is "limited and sufficient unto itself, not linked in any intrinsic way with […] the rest of the world" and this unity of place blurs the linear time represented by the life of the generations into the cyclical time of living with the seasons. As a result, time seems at a standstill and one can linger. Time freezes in the isolated place, making it adverse to change.

In carceral idylls, folkloric time is replaced by prison time. I have argued elsewhere that carceral idylls "are idylls precisely because they focus on the isolation of the subject to a place where time works differently, a 'stillness' or 'ekstasis' that is deemed necessary to achieve linear progression *and* restoration to 'normalcy'" on the part of those confined (Stuit 2020). In order to maintain this ekstasis, prisons infamously work with repetitive routines and time schedules, while the duration of the sentence is both random and calculated: "concrete time is abstracted, multiplied by a mysterious variable, and then made concrete again as punishment in a precise quantity of time" (Hardt 1997, 64). As both a spatial and temporal strategy, carceral idylls thus banish socially by "doling out" a time that is multiply confining: it is cyclical because it is a running in place through routine, yet sitting through it involves enduring a linear but random duration towards a sense of imagined and immanent return to normalcy. On release, however, one's sense of futurity may easily be foreclosed due to social stigma and a lack of opportunity and structural support.

In penitentiary regimes, this coupling of seclusion and prison time reflects the belief that a life gone astray can undergo improvement, moral correction and transformation in ways that benefit both individuals and society at large, if only that criminal could be enclosed – physically or otherwise – in the right way, in the right place and for the right amount of time (Stuit 2020). This is the definition of the carceral idyll as it pertains to both benevolent and malignant prison design: that there can be a prison so well designed, that is either so effective or so humane, that detention ceases to be "true" punishment. Carceral idylls suggest that if incarceration is "felicitous"[7] in how it combines temporal and spatial exclusion it must therefore also follow that it is acceptable or even desirable.

As the notion of "felicitous" incarceration suggests, carceral idylls require quite a bit of maintenance. Since they "involve experiences, scenes, and incidents of incarceration that can never last" (Stuit 2020), one cannot safely

assume that what is successful once will also work the next time. In other words, idylls are an active doing that need constant affirmation in order for their naturalisation of material conditions to succeed. Idylls are *made* to last, often in favour of maintaining the status quo as pleasant, precisely through metaphors of refuge like the home and the garden. In the close reading that is to follow, I will discuss the home first.

I never slept in my cell // the prison and the home

Metaphors that associate the prison with the home touch the basic ambivalence of carceral experiences because they revolve around the "dual function of enclosure" as either safety or custody (Fludernik 2019, 231). That is to say, idyllic shades of carcerality fundamentally revolve around agency:

> Seclusion, if self-imposed, can be an idyllic situation of refuge, peace, and creativity […], but if the door is shut on you, or somebody wants to confine you, the same space becomes a trap and is experienced as threatening and alienating.
>
> (2019, 50–51)

Nowhere is this ambivalence more clearly articulated than in the relation between the prison and "the psychological significance of the house and all sorts of enclosures (garrets, cellars, boxes, drawers) in which we store treasures and into which we retreat" (Fludernik 2019, 232).

The protective features of the home have even given rise to the topos of the happy prison (Brombert 1978), which is found in a surprising number of literary texts but was particularly pronounced during the Romantic period (Fludernik 2019, 225). Considering the shift to the penitentiary at the turn of the 19th century, this yoking between the prison and the home may come as no surprise, since innovative prison architecture at the time saw the principle of privacy as a superior condition for breeding morality. While in the prison privacy materialised as the enforced isolation of the individual within the cell – what Robin Evans describes as solitude in *The Fabrication of Virtue* – in the house it materialised as the restrained intimacy of the nuclear family, or, in other words, domesticity (1982). In the present day, the connection resurfaces in the architectural innovation of the "prison house," "an architectural genre that includes a range of homely, small-scale carceral facilities" placed in "normal" neighbourhoods (Puddu 2022, 1). These facilities focus on the conjunction of the collective space of the communal kitchen and the replacement of the privacy of the prison cell with a customised bedroom. As Puddu notes about these initiatives by Belgian NGO De Huizen, the value of solitude and privacy "so strongly conceptualized in the prison cell [has returned], unquestioned and dressed-up as domesticity, in the normalized bedroom of the 'prison house'" (2022, 21).

In *1986, or a Sphinx's Interior*, the connection to the home first comes up in the core of the film, which consists of a conversation between Geerman and Weeber in the replica, with Glas again asking questions from behind the scenes. In this scene, Weeber and Geerman are sitting right beside each other, Weeber in the chair and Geerman on the bed, but they are never filmed in the same shot. When Glas asks Weeber to elaborate on the colours of the walls, Weeber explains that he finds the colours beautiful, specifying that Dutch people might not like them but that people from the Antilles do: "They feel at home. So do I. I grew up with those colours. We had them at home" (22.50).[8] When Glas asks Geerman, who, like Weeber, turns out to be from Curaçao, whether the colours made him feel at home, too, he answers affirmatively but struggles to find the right words. Weeber interrupts him and changes the topic.

The second iteration of the home is that of domestic routine, as viewers closely observe a young Weeber, represented by actor Ali-Ben Horsting, in his increasingly thorough tests of the replica. In the course of the film, these tests shift gradually, almost unnoticeably, from checking the measurements of the original design to actually trying to live in the space. From wondering whether prisoners will bump their heads during their everyday routines, Weeber moves to doing push-ups, eating a meal, reading a TV guide, and dully watching television in the now darkened cell (Figure 5.3).

Where real-life Weeber seems to consider it an act of aesthetic alleviation to create proximity between the prison and the home in the very design of De Schie prison, this sequence in the film debunks the carceral idyll that arises in a comparison with the home and replaces it with the tedium of a domestic routine. The bleakness of the scene is further exacerbated by the

Figure 5.3 Young Weeber watches television in the darkened cell. *1986, or a Sphinx's Interior*. Video still.

ominous soundtrack and young Weeber's isolation in the cell. In this way, the film foregrounds the cruelty of the prison cell, but also critically reiterates the historical connections between the solitude of the cell and the privacy of domestic life, described by Michael Hardt as follows:

> [W]hen you come into contact with the existential questions and ontological preoccupations of inmates, you cannot but doubt the quality of your own existence […] My life too is structured through disciplinary regimes, my days move on with a mechanical repetitiveness – work, commute, tv, sleep. I do not have the same physical discomfort or the sexual deprivation, but even without the walls and bars my life ends up being strangely similar.
> (Hardt 1997, 66–67)

From within this critical and destructive comparison between the prison and the home, the film returns to the perspective of Jonathan Geerman in its closing. Cast over the gloomy face of the young Carel Weeber lying awake in the cell (Figure 5.4), we hear Geerman's voice:

> I never slept in my cell. Here. I slept at home. In a big bedroom, in a big bed. And when I woke up and I realised I was here, this seemed like such a small place. You see the bars and the space and you realise where you are. In my sleep I was at home.[9]

Rather than suggesting any similarity between the prison and the home, Geerman instead uses his own images of home to bracket and thereby survive the realities of the prison cell. Earlier in the film, Geerman describes how

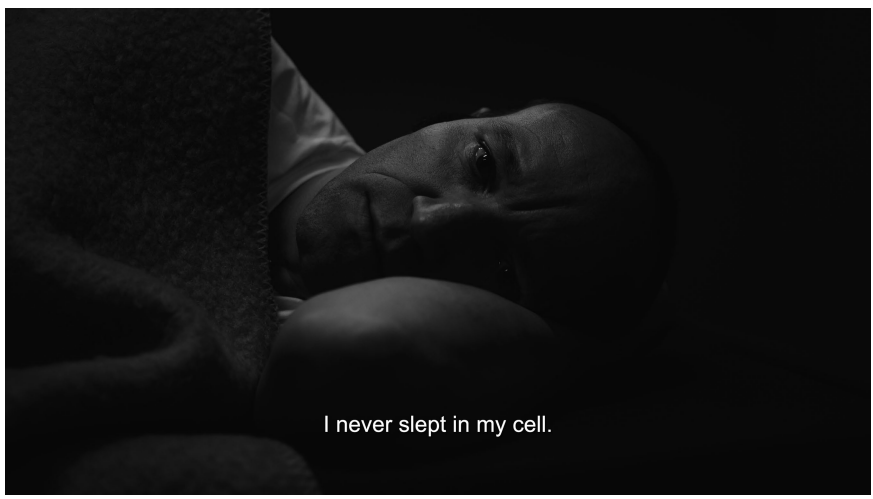

Figure 5.4 Young Weeber lies down to sleep in the cell. *1986, or a Sphinx's Interior*. Video still.

much he missed his loved ones and often wished they were in his cell to talk with him (Glas 2023, 12.21), but that summum of domestic privacy, the bedroom, is kept strictly separate from the prison domain. Every night when he goes to sleep, he takes a time out from prison time, so to speak, even if waking up in the cell was clearly a daily disappointment to him.

In the end, both young Weeber's debunking of domestic solitude as bliss and Geerman's use of the spacious bedroom at home to make the prison inhabitable undo idyllic contaminations between the domestic and the prison domain. The first by critiquing the numbness produced by the cell and domestic routine alike, the second by suggesting that one cannot get by in a prison cell without a separate image of home. These aesthetic acts thus emphasise Fludernik's insistence that carcerality revolves around agency. In the face of the larger prison structure, both young Weeber's and Geerman's responses reflect the need to take active charge of which aspects of one's surroundings are deemed idyllic or not. The carceral, then, not only requires idylls in order to become "felicitous," as I've suggested earlier, but people also need idyllic constructions in order to survive the carceral. Especially in the foregrounding of the prison cell's cruel workings on Geerman, the idyll's emotional function of creating a time-out from the everyday needs to stay somewhat intact. But if we cannot completely denounce carceral idylls as misguided fantasies that can alleviate or condone any kind of space, how else can the task of undoing their scripting power be approached?

Peines perdues, paradise regained // Louk Hulsman's garden

In the second part of Glas's exhibition, the implicit, but unavoidable presence of the idyll in the carceral takes tangible shape in a large photograph of a lush garden placed in the centre of a room focused on the abolitionist legacy of Louk Hulsman. In this installation, the image of the garden is used, not as a way to make the prison itself more inhabitable, but as a thinking space from which to conceive of carceral regimes differently. As I will explain, however, the abolitionist ideals that are communicated through the metaphor of the garden ultimately will also have to work through the idyll's inherent ambivalences.

The second space in the exhibition is much darker than the first one. One's attention is initially drawn to the right, where two large screens mounted against a dark wall show the film *1986, or Recalling Louk Hulsman* (2024). The film features dialogues between a number of students of criminal law – so, future prosecutors, lawyers and judges – and people who have experience with the criminal justice system, four as detainees and one as an employee. The conversations are structured around excerpts from Louk Hulsman's *Peines perdues. Le système pénal a question* (1982). With the help of the law students, the participants who have spent time in prison are preparing for a live recital at Erasmus University, where Hulsman taught as professor of criminal justice and criminology.

Every person in the film has their own distinct perspective on detention, yet most of the discussion takes place around structure and agency. Three out of the four detainees that feature in the film strongly emphasise their own responsibility for coming into contact with the law, even if they concede that their environment – where they lived, who their friends were – played a role too. All three of them also feel strongly about being denied the chance to learn or even flourish during their litigation or prison sentence. One person explains that most of his guards had very little awareness of prisoners' rights and therefore automatically denied all sorts of simple requests that are nonetheless in line with these rights (Glas 2024, 13.10–14.30). Another former detainee explains how the protocols of criminal law alienated him thoroughly from his own trial and litigation process. Even his lawyer could, by law, not access the details of the administration of justice as it descended on him (Glas 2024, 19.21–20.33).[10]

As becomes clear from the conversations in the film, Hulsman envisioned a system that returns agency to both perpetrators and victims by replacing criminal law with processes of institutionally supported conflict resolution. Analysing a scene from a film made by the Dutch Ministry of Justice in which newly convicted individuals arrive in prison and are being prepped for detention, Hulsman uses the metaphor of the conveyor belt to detail how people are mechanically moved through the various stages in the penal system without the people administering this system giving the process much thought (Glas 2024, 34.02–34.32; Hulsman 1982, 69–70). Instead, Hulsman saw the call for punishment that drives criminal law as the narrowest of possible responses to a situation "gone wrong" (1982, 107–108) because it blocks out any possibility to focus on social self-regulation (137–138), on offering circumstances in which people who commit a crime can redeem themselves (71) and on what the social fabric in general and victims in particular need in order to be restored (96). He was in favour of excising criminal law from society altogether (thereby nonetheless maintaining the prison as a space of recovery and rehabilitation for extreme cases (1982, 100)).

In the exhibition, this critique on mechanised punishment is "prefaced" by the garden photograph: you have to walk past it in order to reach the film space. The garden is mounted on a matte dark green wall –the exact same colour as the prison bars of De Schie – with soft lighting emanating from behind the frame (Figures 5.5 and 5.6). The panel explaining the content of the film is displayed across the room, in a well-lit corner directly on one's left, but the photograph itself remains uncoded by any curatorial material besides the comment on the panel that it is a picture of Hulsman's own garden. A layered effect emerges. Hulsman's garden against its background of prison bar green frames the conversations around criminal law, but without scripting how this relation between the garden, the aesthetics of prison design and penalty should be thought.

It does not seem to be a coincidence that Hulsman was an avid gardener. Both in a material and metaphoric sense, the garden plays a crucial role in his

Figure 5.5 Photograph of the main section of Robert Glas's art installation "1986, or Recalling Louk Hulsman" at TENT Rotterdam 2024. © Aad Hoogendoorn.

Figure 5.6 Photograph of a garden from Louk Hulsman's archive in Robert Glas's art installation "1986, or Recalling Louk Hulsman" at TENT Rotterdam 2024. © Aad Hoogendoorn.

perspective on the abolition of criminal law. When Hulsman's house was burgled many years ago, he went through great pains to have the people responsible work his garden with him once a week rather than have them punished through the system. It proved very difficult to persuade those who handled his case to allow him to even meet the burglars, let alone offer this alternative course of events.[11] This only testifies to how naturalised and rusted notions of what constitutes a crime, a perpetrator or a victim prevent the emergence of a logic around social conflicts that takes the whole ecology of a given situation into account and focuses on repair and compensation rather than punishment (Hulsman 1982, 105).

In *Peines perdues. Le système pénal a question*, Hulsman closes his book-length plea for abolishing criminal law by way of a garden metaphor:

> If in my garden, I exclude the obstacles which prevent the sun and the water from fertilizing the earth, plants will rise which I didn't even suspect existed. Like that, the disappearance of the State's punitive system opens, in a healthier and more dynamic conviviality, the pathways for a new justice.
>
> (Hulsman 1982, 145)

In this metaphor, obstacles that block sun and water are compared to the criminal law system and the emerging plants to people who are prosecuted for a crime. Such a reading is also in line with Glas's documentary, in which the formerly incarcerated individuals emphasise how the system actively stifles their agency in shaping their lives. The garden, in this interpretation, could then be read as an alternative to prison that resonates with how gardens are used for reformation and rehabilitation in prison already. In this perspective, "an ethical stance develops that implies submission to the discipline of care – not by the target of custody, persons or plants, but rather by a reshaping of custody itself around caregiving" (Brown 2014, 80).

As in the case with the prison as home trope discussed in the previous section, however, it is important to take heed of the garden's carceral *and* idyllic features. For architect David Bell, for instance, the garden and the prison "appear as two sides of the same coin" (1985, 20). Like prisons (and homes for that matter), gardens are spaces of enclosure and this idea of enclosure – "the garden as a place apart, a different place – pervades all our garden thinking" (Helphand 2006, 2). Most commonly, gardens are considered positive spaces of refuge and contemplation, offering respite from life indoors or civilisation at large through a (re)connection with nature (Helphand 2006, 3). At the basis of these Western ideas of the garden lies the biblical narrative about the fall from paradise, in which the Garden of Eden remains operative as an idyllic script forever to be regained. Garden theorist Kenneth Helphand describes this script as follows: "At one end is a nostalgic desire to return to our origins in the ideal perfection of the past. At the other is a quest for a hoped-for-future, crystalized in the image of celestial paradise" (2006, 5).

This impossible script about the loss of and restoration to innocence resonates with the central dynamic of prison time I described earlier: through the toil of "doing time," a prisoner can regain access to society, metaphorically cleansed of sin. In this biblically inflected and quintessentially idyllic timeline, the redemption that lies in toil turns prison itself into a metaphorical garden, although such garden metaphors are obviously "perverted versions of their congenial counterparts outside prison walls" (Fludernik 2019, 611). In the "correctional" garden of prison greening, for instance, such labour is, at worst, "a dangerous, engaged paternalism and at its best can only be palliative, not a cure or a fix capable of supplanting the dysfunctionality of what it means to imprison" (Brown 2014, 76; see also Hazelett 2023, 442).

Historically speaking, too, gardens are not just refuges, but exist by grace of enclosures that rub shoulders with colonial histories of clearing wasteland and growing a controlled setting in its stead. They remain strongly associated with the racial exploitation of labour, especially in settler colonial or plantation contexts (Kincaid 1999). As such, the garden "will always depend, to some extent, upon the privacy of the owner, the [racialised] control of labour and property" (Brown 2014, 75). In the prison's associations with the garden, however, the idyll's ability to slip into a sublimation of working in nature as wholesome and restorative tends to obfuscate these fraught connections. The very essence of an aesthetic enjoyment of the garden – the "form, pattern, proportions, intricacy, boldness, craft and technique" (Helphand 2006, 20) – can only exist by blocking certain, supposedly undesirable things out and therefore necessarily engage in processes of exclusion and redaction.

Considering these fraught legacies, it is appropriate that the focus on the aesthetics in the garden photograph in Glas's exhibition features against the dark green of De Schie's prison bars (Figure 5.6). The photograph seeks to depict the beauty of the garden's internal logic and is preoccupied with its vegetation. The exclusions that allow the garden to be seen as idyllic do press in on its edges – as testified by the corner of the tall building that peeps from behind the canopy and the hogweed just to the left of the centre of the photograph – but overall it shows us this garden as a *product* of the labour and care that went into it. In keeping with the idyll's inclination to sublimate, it does not show us the labour itself. This leads me to wonder, was this picture taken before or after the burglars and Hulsman worked this garden together? What, exactly, was Hulsman taking a picture of? Is this a utopic redaction of the garden's context, an acknowledgement that garden and prison exist as two sides of a metaphoric continuum, or is it a commemoration of the garden as an alternative to the prison, a performative gesture that foregrounds an understanding of the garden as a metaphor for a society without penal law, if not without prisons altogether?

Ultimately, it is Glas's aesthetic act of placing the photograph of the garden against Weeber's prison bar green that points us in a more definitive direction. The shades of carcerality that surround the garden are presented at the same time as the vividness produced by the frame; the light in the frame

illuminates the brightness of the greens in the original garden *and* highlights its dark green background. In this simultaneity, the inherent structure of the idyll becomes readable as an aesthetic bracketing of the carcerality that surrounds it. A bracketing that produces a temporary outsideness to reality that allows for a tinkering with utopic forms. Artificially suspended from its conditions of enclosure, yet reframed by Glas as inherently tied to the carcerality that surrounds it, the garden shines even more brightly as a signifier of the liberatory desire to change the restrictions that give it meaning.

Conclusion

Carceral idylls, as aesthetic bracketings of reality, can serve to perpetuate and condone imprisonment but also to critique it and break it open. Because of this potential for resistance in the face of perpetuating systems, it seems unwise to debunk idylls as fantasy and false consciousness altogether. As Jonathan Geerman's use of the idyll of the home in *1986, or a Sphinx's Interior* suggests, the metaphoric connections that make any idyll applicable to prison spaces necessarily have to revolve around the expression of agency. At the same time, the film offers a more scathing critique of the discrepancy between prison design's clinically optimistic intent and what it is like to sit on the receiving end of that. The sequences where the film stages a young Weeber testing his own prison cell design further reveal the absurdity of the prison as home metaphoric pair by reducing life in the cell to a tedious cycle of lonely domestic activities. Neither home nor prison remains available as idyll by the time young Weeber is through with them. The film thus proposes a role reversal in which carceral experience overrides prison design and punctures the cultural and emotional work carceral idylls do in making prison spaces palatable and available for social acceptance over time.

The utopic horizon of abolition that is propped up by the prison as garden metaphor works differently. In this case, both the idyllic charge and its underlying metaphoric pair are maintained. Because the carceral remains visible as a backdrop of the garden in how the photo of Hulsman's garden is presented in the exhibition, the artwork frontloads the temporary suspension of the garden from enclosure, but without the loss of context that usually accompanies such framing. The aesthetic bracketing achieved in this exhibition, I argue, is precisely what allows the garden metaphor to go beyond survival tactics and deconstruction in a way that the metaphor of the home does not. Where the prison as home metaphor seemed to be mostly nostalgic – Weeber remembers the colours of the cell walls from his childhood home; Geerman thinks back on his bedroom at home – the prison as garden metaphor in Glas's rendition of Hulsman's abolitionism is oriented towards the future of a utopic horizon.

Despite these different emphases on past and future, however, both Geerman's response of sleeping at home rather than in the cell and the image of the garden that suspends its own enclosure are ways of catching one's breath

within the ties that bind. Coping with the lasting imprint of enclosure – on the body, the mind, society at large – means to resort to the structure of idyllic temporality as such: a time of fugitivity, of swerving, of going elsewhere temporarily in order to face reality anew. The garden, in contrast to the home, however, not only makes prison inhabitable or questions its carceral logics, but may also serve to reimagine the punitivity that lies at its root. Indeed, as Paul Smith has argued and as Louk Hulsman understood very well, "coming to terms with the symbolic logics of culture should be the first and not the last step in any analysis and reform of criminal justice" (2009, 183). It is my hope that this analysis of the forms in which carceral idylls manifest, whose perspective – and thus whose privilege – they represent, with which material and metaphoric legacies they interact, and whether they do so to obfuscate or to illuminate freedom, helps to make incisions in the cultural acceptance of contemporary carceral regimes.

Notes

1 "Zo, wat een mooie kamer is dit zeg. Wat een mooi kamertje. Zo mooi heb ik het nooit begrepen." English translations rendered here correspond with the film's subtitles.
2 "Nee, ik denk dat als je een paar dagen zit dan vind je het geen straf." Glas vraagt: "En voor een jaar?" Weeber: "Volgens mij went dat heel snel."
3 In Western literature, liminal zones of the prison (thresholds, doors, prison bars, windows) are particularly emotionally charged because of their role in entering and leaving the cell (Fludernik 2019, 232).
4 "Heel vaak stond ik… Als ie open stond, rookte ik ook zo." "Oh ja?" vraagt Glas. "Ja, precies zo. Ja dan sta ik zo naar buiten te kijken." Geerman kijkt van links naar rechts. "En dan ga ik weer terug." The English translation in the film's subtitles switches to the present tense in the last phrase, rather than in the remark about looking out while standing in the door frame. The English translation given in the body text is my own.
5 I am indebted to Stacey Vorster for this analogy between Humanities and Social Sciences methods.
6 Scenes of transcendence narrated in hagiographic texts from as early as the 1200s onwards are also an important influence here (Fludernik 2019, 1–5).
7 I take this term from J.L. Austin's speech act theory, in which an utterance is not deemed true or untrue, but is analysed for how successfully it reaches its goal in a given context.
8 "Ik vind het zelf mooi. D'r zijn mensen die zeuren erover, maar dat zijn Nederlanders zeg ik altijd maar. Antilleanen vinden het fijn. Zijn blij met die kleuren. Denken dat ze thuis zijn. Ik ook hoor. Ik ben zo opgegroeid in die kleuren. Thuis was ook die kleuren." Glas vraagt: "En deed het jou aan thuis denken, Jonathan?" Jonathan zoekt naar woorden: "Ja, ik zat met m'n… in mijn…"
9 "Ik sliep nooit in mijn cel. Hierbinnen. Ik sliep thuis. In een grote slaapkamer, op een groot bed. En wanneer ik wakker word en ik besef dat ik hier ben, is dit [sic] plek echt klein. Dan voelt het echt héél erg klein. Je ziet die tralies, je ziet die ruimte en je denkt 'shit' ik ben gewoon hier. Terwijl, in mijn slaap ik was thuis."
10 This is the case when *terbeschikkingstelling* (*tbs*) is at stake, for instance when hospitalisation is involved.
11 Many thanks to Máximo Sozzo, for sharing this story with me during the Transcending the Antipodal Implications of Structure and Agency conference at which I presented a draft of this paper (17 October 2024).

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